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WE CLAIM:

1. A polymeric nanoparticle capable of entrapping a fluorescent dye or other substance.
2. A composition containing polymeric nanoparticles entrapping a fluorescent dye or other substance.
3. The composition of claim 2, wherein the nanoparticle is comprised of a biodegradable polymer.
4. The composition of claim 3, wherein the biodegradable polymer is selected from the group consisting of: PLGA, PLA, PVA, PGA, Chitosan, Albumin, and any combination thereof.
5. The composition of claims 2 or 3, wherein the nanoparticle is about 1 to 1000 nm in size.
6. The composition of claims 2 or 3, wherein the size of the nanoparticle is in the micrometer range.
7. The composition of claims 2 or 3, wherein the fluorescent dye is indocyanine green (ICG).
8. The composition of claim 2, further comprising a targeting molecule.
9. The composition of claim 8, wherein the targeting molecule is selected from the group consisting of: an antibody, a protein, a polypeptide, a polysaccharide, DNA, RNA, a chemical moiety, a nucleic acids, lipids, carbohydrates, and any combination thereof.

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10. The composition of claim 2 further comprising a pharmaceutically acceptable vehicle.
11. A method of making polymeric nanoparticles that entrap a dye or other substance, said method comprising the steps of:
 - a) making a solution containing the carrier polymer and the dye;
 - b) dispersing the above solution into a second solution where the carrier polymer will form nanoparticles;
 - c) allowing a nanoparticle suspension to form wherein the nanoparticles entrap the dye;
 - d) separating the nanoparticles from the liquid phase by centrifuging or other methods.
12. A polymeric nanoparticle-dye complex made according to the method of claim 11.
13. A kit comprising the polymeric nanoparticle-dye complex of claim 12.
14. A PLGA nanoparticle-ICG complex.
15. A contrast agent comprising a polymeric nanoparticle-near infrared dye complex.
16. The contrast agent of claim 15, wherein said agent is useful for identifying inhomogeneities within the scattering media of tissues.
17. The contrast agent of claim 16, wherein the inhomogeneities are tumors and melanine.
18. A method of stabilizing IR fluorescent dyes comprising entrapping the dye in a polymeric nanoparticle.

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19. A method for treating cancer, comprising administering to a subject in need of treatment a composition comprising one or more polymeric nanoparticle- dye complexes in an amount effective to prevent, ameliorate, reduce, or eliminate cancer cells.